

Safety Belt Use Soars--Tops 90 Percent

California motorists buckled their safety belts in record numbers during 1998, pushing belt use to 90 percent during 1998 - the highest in the nation.

That means nearly 19 million of the state's 21 million drivers buckle up. It's an astonishing record, considering that in 1985, the year before California's secondary safety belt law became effective, 26 percent fastened their safety belts.

Safety belt compliance didn't happen by accident. The California Highway Patrol supported legislation, launched awareness campaigns and joined hands with a broad spectrum of organizations to create a groundswell of support for safety belts.

Nineteen eighty-six was a landmark for the CHP, the year that the secondary safety belt law became operative. The secondary law for the first time allowed officers to cite a motorist for failure to wear the belt, but only if the driver is first stopped for another offense.

The first year the law was in effect, CHP officers wrote 142,000 safety belt citations. By 1989, citations had risen to 716,000, about one-fifth of all citations written by our officers.

Vigorous enforcement had an effect. Seventy percent of drivers were buckling up by 1991. The CHP didn't do it alone, however. In 1988 the CHP organized the Califor-

nia Safety Belt Task Force. Former Commissioner Maury Hannigan headed the group, assisted by current Commissioner D. O. Helmick. The Task Force proved to be a key element in wider compliance.

The Task Force was composed of representatives from several dozen groups, including government, special interest organizations, safety activists, police, educators and the medical community.

Convincing law enforcement officers they needed to buckle up was a significant campaign for the Task Force. At the time, officers were more than likely to leave their safety belts on the vehicle floor.

Law enforcement needed to set an example for the motoring public.

A disastrous 1988 crash between four Los Angeles Police Department officers in two cars demonstrated to the enforcers the need for safety belts. Three of four officers involved were killed. The surviving officer was the only one wearing a belt.

The Task Force adopted a policy supporting the use of the lap/shoulder harness, and using the soft sell approach, the CHP sent out a safety belt ambassador, now-Chief Steve Ellis, to local police agencies to spell out the benefits.

"Convincing law enforcement to fasten their belts and start working our secondary law was initially a tough sell here in California," Ellis said. "I used to talk about the money we spend on weapons and equipment and all our safety-related training." Then I'd say, 'Here's a weapon hanging on the side of the patrol car that will provide more protection than all the rest.'

"To their credit," Ellis said, "our personnel and the allied agencies throughout the state came around rather quickly and California assumed a national leadership role in occupant restraint."

Ellis spent three years working with local law enforcement and traffic safety agencies across the country and was very gratified to see everyone's efforts pay off.

"Once they got on board, the results were fantastic. Law enforcement was the key element to success. We had to buckle up ourselves and start

writing lots of seat belt tickets. That's when deaths began to drop."

In 1993, the Legislature's primary safety belt law went into effect, which meant officers now could pull motorists over solely for belt violations. Usage immediately jumped to 83 percent and has been rising ever since.

The CHP has used the twin inducements of enforcement and education to accomplish its goal. Radio public service announcements, two videos featuring crash dummies Vince and Larry and billboard advertising were all a part of the campaign to educate the public.

Perhaps the most persuasive, however, was the incorporation of the safety belt message into fabric of the public information message, from press releases to crash reports.

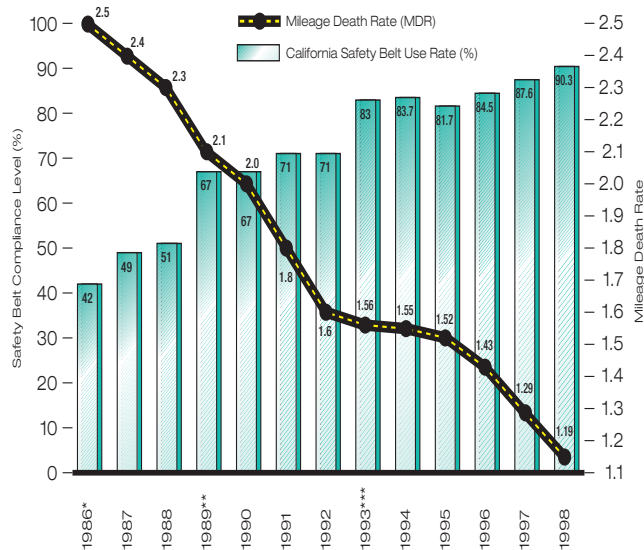
Officers now are required to include in their reports safety belt use or non-use by crash victims, which raises the awareness of belt use by both officers and the media.

The results are clear. Safety belt use is a major factor in the years-long drop in people killed on California highways. The 1998 mileage death rate (persons killed per 100 million miles driven) is 1.19, the lowest in history.

The record of child safety seat use is somewhat lower, 85.8 percent in 1998. The CHP conducts an active education campaign in this area as well.

While we can't overlook tougher speed and DUI enforcement and safer cars, California's record demonstrates safety belts are a major reason the public rides safer on the state's highways.

COMPARISON OF MILEAGE DEATH RATE (MDR) WITH SAFETY BELT COMPLIANCE



* Secondary Safety belt law takes effect.
 ** Expanded measurement of belt use (added rural).
 *** Primary safety belt law takes effect.